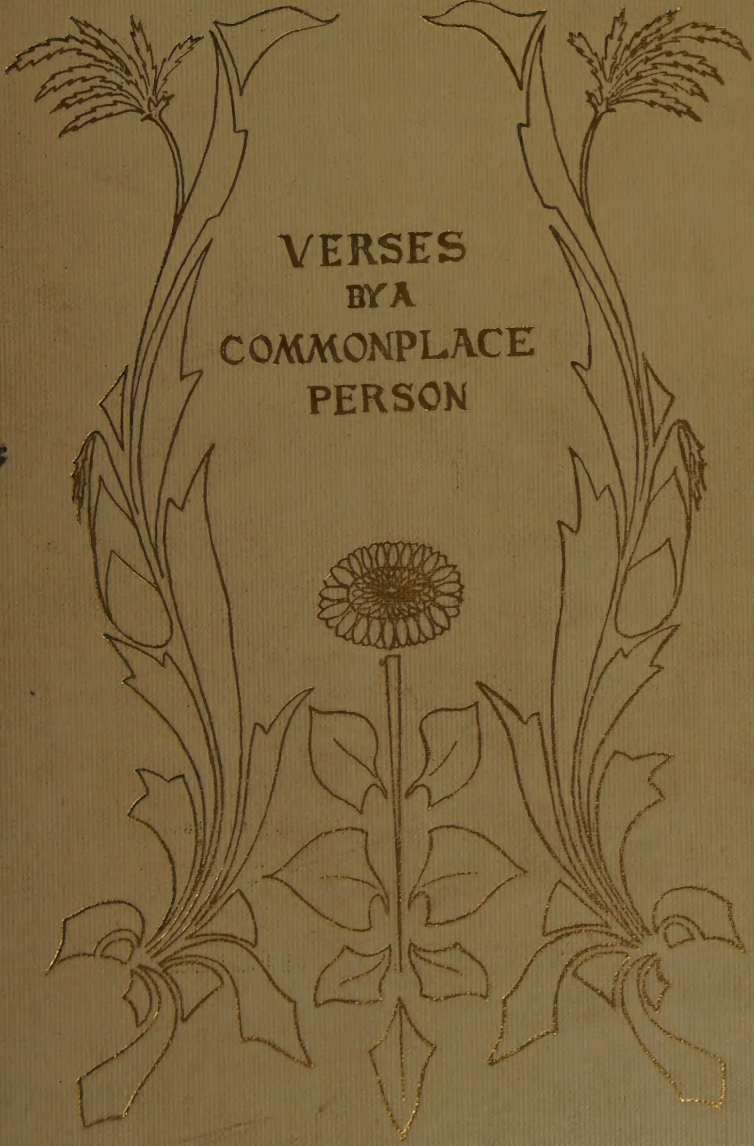
VERSES
BY A
COMMONPLACE
PERSON



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VERSES BY A COMMONPLACE PERSON

BY ESTHER M. CLARK.

Illustrations
by
INA MARTIN.

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DEDICATION.

TO MY MOTHER.

In years long past you were held fast,
By homely tasks, to Life's dull prose.
Yet in your heart there lived apart
The love of poetry. Who knows,

My dear, if so to you I owe
What measure of poetic sense
My verse contains? Though faint, such strains
May be to you some recompense.

A CREED.

TO THINK, and say, and do my best;
Then, when I leave this world's unrest,
Trust God that, in His mercy, He
Will do the best He can for me.

A PRAYER.

3

LORD GOD, ere I shall cease to be of use
In this world, where the Fates play fast and loose
With their poor toys; while I have some strength still
To shield the weak, when men would do them ill;
While still the blood within my veins runs red,
And I can serve with hand, and heart, and head;
While I have still my senses, and some wit,
To use for God and man, as I see fit;—
Then let the Shadow fall upon my face,
So I may go in peace to mine own place,
Ere I grow old and helpless, to depend
Upon the charity of some good friend,—
Leaving this life's joys with no vain regrets,
The world forgetting, as the world forgets.

MELANCHOLIA.

MELANCHOLIA.

MY Lady Melancholy,
She hath a wistful air;
She weareth sweet, dead blossoms
Upon her breast and hair.
And much dominion hath she
In all the sunny land,
Yet here she sitteth, brooding,
Her chin upon her hand.

The merry Imps of Laughter,
Right saucily they say,
"Ho, Lady Melancholy,
Come dance with us to-day!"
She? She, the all-disdainful?
And so the happy band
Pass on and leave her sitting,
Her chin upon her hand.

She seeth not glad faces
That dot the passing throng;
She hath no eye for sunshine,
She hath no ear for song.
The world in which she liveth
Is by her shadow spanned,
And there she sitteth, brooding,
Her chin upon her hand.

The evening shadows deepen
The purple 'neath her eyes;
The sweet, dead rose reflecteth
The ashen of the skies.
And when the gentle Twilight
In fancies clothes the land,
It findeth her, still sitting,
Her chin upon her hand.

IMPATIENCE.

I GROW impatient of the Night—
When will you come?
This darkness hath engulfed me quite—
When will you come?
The roses faint beneath the dew,
The locusts shrill the long night through;
They madden me with thoughts of you!
When will you come?

What joy have I in Day's delights?
When will you come?
The days are even as the nights—
When will you come?
Ah, love, could either longer be,
'Twere stealing from Eternity!
And how the dial mocketh me!
When will you come?

My heart hath need of patient grace—
When will you come?
No heed take I of time or space—
When will you come?
Since Day is Night, and near is far,
And peace is only where you are,
See, love, I set my door ajar!
When will you come?

TO A ROSE IN A BOOK.

TO A ROSE IN A BOOK.

OH, some one hath hidden you, rose,
When once you were fragrant and fair;
And who she was, nobody knows—
I wonder, does nobody care?
Were you token of hope or despair?
Did you mark a love's triumph, or close?
Oh, she hath forgotten, I'll swear!
Though who she was, nobody knows.

And some one hath fondled you, rose,
And kissed you, and pressed you in here.
Is it folly for me to suppose
This tiny, brown blot was a tear?
You are faded and yellow and sere,
Yet I shall not disturb your repose,
Since once to her heart you were dear;
Though who she was, nobody knows.

I put you back tenderly, rose,
You would crumble to dust in the air.
And who she was, nobody knows—
I wonder, does nobody care?
Yet I'll write on the margin, "O where
Is she who once treasured this rose?
Peace be to her soul is my prayer;
Though who she was, only God knows!"

WHEN THE YOUNG LIE DOWN TO DIE.

ALL the beauty, all the freshness of the world
is theirs by right;
And before their souls know bitterness, before
their hearts know blight;
Ere the Hand that shifts the scenes of life hath
ushered in the Night,
They, the flower of all the earth, lie down
to die.

Fold the empty hands that never of Earth's
dross shall have their fill;
Shut the eyes that saw but beauty, where our
older eyes saw ill;
Close the lips God made for laughter, now the
heart beneath is still,
When the young,—so fair, so young!—lie
down to die.

Dim are eyes that see, through falling tears, how
fair Death makes his own;
Trembling hands shall push the curls away from
foreheads white as stone;
Aching hearts shall question, "Why?" and have
no answer to their moan,
When the young, the loved and young,
lie down to die.

Closed behind them are the gates of all the things
that were to be,
That their quiet hands shall never touch, their
eyes shall never see;
And, O Death, thou hast thy sting! O Grave,
thou hast thy victory!
When the young (dear God, the young!)
lie down to die.

THE PICTURED EYES.

THE PICTURED EYES.

SHE that hath sorrowful eyes,
Eyes by the lily-lids swept,
Deep in their sombreness lies
Something of sorrow unwept.
That which she fain would have kept
Hid from a petty world's stare,
Silently, surely hath crept
Into the eyes of despair.

Eyes of a plenty there are,
Limpid and shining and clear;
Happier, brighter by far,
Eyes that shed never a tear.
Deeper and stiller these pools,
Nothing of lightness is there;
Tears are for weaklings—and fools—
Not for such splendid despair.

She that hath sorrowful eyes
  Haunteth me early and late.
Was she too proud, or too wise,
  For passionate railings at Fate?
Was she of lofty estate?
  Was she as haughty as fair?
Is it all writ in these great,
  Luminous eyes of despair?

Ah, were she living! But now
  Heavy the churchyard dust lies
Thick on the beautiful brow,
  Thick on the sorrowful eyes.
Dead! With her sorrow unwept!
  Dead! Yet how mockingly fair
That which the canvas hath kept,
  Picturing forth her despair.

THE HEART'S DESIRE.

MY heart and I, we sit alone
Beside the embers of a fire;
We make no cry, we make no moan,
But we have lost the heart's desire.

Love lightly came and lightly went,
And came not back this way again;
And left us with our goods all spent,
Yet we are richer now than then.

Because a gracious sense is here,
Of peace that can not be denied;
Since on that day Love passed so near,
A voice within us woke and cried.

A shameless voice it was, and bold;
It cried aloud and spoke Love's name.
Love turned and smiled, and all was told,
But we were mute for very shame.

Love lightly came and lightly went,
As comes and goes the summer rain;
And though he left us well content,
Our only recompense is pain.

My heart and I, we sit alone
Beside the embers of a fire;
And naught have we to call our own,
Nor have we yet the heart's desire.

PHILOSOPHY.

SOME callow youth, whose tendencies ran largely into rhyme,
This bit of crude philosophy wrote, once upon a time:

"I hope I have a mind above flirtations,
dead and past;
I don't care who his first love was—I'd
rather be his last."

I pondered thoughtfully and long upon this gem of truth,
First formed into expression in the think-works of the youth.

"I hope I have a mind above,"—(Why
should I care to know
Just who the Janes and Marys were, who
charmed him long ago?)

"Flirtations dead and past;—" (They do
not worry me a bit.
It's no concern of mine, I'm sure, just how
hard he was hit.)

"I don't care who his first love was,—"
(He, likely, couldn't say.
Why should I conjure up the ghosts of
Love's red-letter day?)

"I'd rather be his last." (The Scriptures
say, "The last shall be
The first, the first the last." Somehow
that rather comforts me.)

So, with the hopeful poet's lines I've taken liberties.
I've left the sentiment intact, but now the version is:

"I hope he's through with early loves, confessed and unconfessed.
I don't care who they were so long as he loves me the best."

TO A VIOLET.

TO A VIOLET.

SWEET violet,
Can I forget
The blissful night I danced with Jennie?
When, of the modest bunch she wore,
I begged a flower, to keep, I swore,
Forever. Could she spare me any?

But, violet,
The arch coquette
My modest boon denied; but, finally,
She pinned you to my coat lapel,
And whispered low, "Now, please don't tell
I pinned this here," and blushed, divinely.

And, violet,
Her eyes were wet;
I stooped and kissed her—no resistance—
And told her—well, no matter what,
I think you heard it, like as not;
The deed was done with your assistance.

So, violet,
I have you yet;
Your blue is now a faded yellow;
And she's a trifle stout and gray,
I saw her just the other day;—
She's married to another fellow.

THE PRICE.

'TWAS on a summer's day when Love, that
Shylock, came to me:
"Of course, we have to pay for all we get in life,"
said he;
"But, then, my wares are worth the price. Will
not my lady buy?"
Now, Love was old and worldly-wise, and barely
twenty I.

So I selected from his stock the things which
pleased me most,
With all a woman's disregard for what the whole
might cost.
Some kisses, some caresses, too, and love-non-
sense galore;
Some tender looks and sighs, some lovers' vows
and,—well, some more.

This Shylock seemed quite satisfied, my purchases all made,
And so was I, forgetting that the price had not been paid.
But he declined politely when I begged him, "Stay and sup."
"I'll call another time," he said, "and then we'll settle up."

'Twas on a winter's day when Love's collector came to me.
Ah, cruel Love, you dared not come to face my misery!
You Shylock! take your pound of flesh,—'twere easier to part
With that than meet the bill's demand and pay Love's price—my heart.

MEMORY.

13

MY Lady Unforgetful,
In revery she stands
With sheaves of rosemary
And poppies in her hands.
And 'round her brows the shadows
Of light and darkness play,
And on her lips the breath of
A rose of yesterday.

My Lady Unforgetful,
Pale mother of Regret,
Glad eyes that look upon her
Are, of a sudden wet.
For with sad dreams she woos us,
Yet sweetest dreams are they,
As fleeting as the dews of
A rose of yesterday.

My Lady Unforgetful,
  She hath elusive ways,
She cometh and she goeth,
  And none may know her days.
A fickle mistress is she,
  Yet who shall say her nay?
And on her cheek the blush of
  A rose of yesterday.

My Lady Unforgetful,
  In robes of gray and red;
And ever 'round her clingeth
  The scent of roses dead.
And lovers of her beauty
  In voices hushed they say,
"O she is but the wraith of
  A rose of yesterday!"

TO-NIGHT.

IF I could come into the room, dear,
When the last bit of daylight has fled,
And through the cigar-smoke and gloom, dear,
Get a glimpse of your blessèd old head,
It would lighten the weight of oppression
That is crushing me, killing me quite,
Just to sit on your knee for confession
Of to-day's sins, to-night.

Am I blue? You'd provoke me to laughter
With the wit that has won you renown.
Am I cross? I'd be penitent after
You'd kissed me and rubbed out the frown.
Oh, I want you to cuddle and pet me,
And say, "It will come out all right."
If you were here, dear, you'd not let me
Be lonesome, to-night.

You may have forgotten what jolly
Good fellows we were in the past,
And say 'twas the veriest folly
For us to imagine 'twould last.
You may hint that a fool's paradise won't
Be viewed in a merciful light.
You may think what you please. I, for one, don't
Regret it, to-night.

I can see you, tipped back in your chair now,
Your head in a halo of smoke,
And your feet on the desk, with no care now
Your soul, or your wrath, to provoke.
The walls, still adorned with the clever,
Quaint fancies in which you delight,
Look down on a floor, strewn, as ever,
With papers, to-night.

Oh, no doubt you'll survive it! I'm—well, I'm
So unearthly cheerful and gay
That no human being could tell I'm
A heartbroken woman to-day.
And they say I'm so cold! (Draw the curtain;
I'd rather they thought they were right.)
But I'm crying, here's one thing that's certain,
For you, dear, to-night.

THE LITTLE GIRL WITH TAFFY-COLORED HAIR.

THE LITTLE GIRL WITH TAFFY-COLORED HAIR.

OH, I couldn't do without her!
There's an atmosphere about her
That dispels my deepest moods of black despair.
I forget that life is tragic,
In her presence, for there's magic
In the little girl with taffy-colored hair.

She's the surest sort of tonic
For the blues, fresh ones or chronic,
And she never seems to have the slightest care.
She's my perfect panacea;
Don't I wish that I might be a-
Nother little girl with taffy-colored hair?

She's like wild, sweet-scented clover,
Fresh and pink; she bubbles over
With that healthy joy in living, which is rare.
Such a face! Serene, contented,
From the round chin, dimple-dented,
To the parting of her taffy-colored hair.

Bless her sunny disposition!
Heaven prosper her ambition!
May the good Lord find He has some more to spare!
For He surely knows that there is
Need of just such missionaries
As the little girl with taffy-colored hair.

A BALLAD OF—NOTHING AT ALL.

16

THERE are ballads of Elinor's eyes,
There are ballads of Abigail's fan.
We have listened to somebody's sighs
Ever since ballad-making began.
They are mostly uncommonly sad,
Of things that are gone past recall;
And some are uncommonly bad,
And one is of—nothing at all.

There are ballads of hope and despair,
Of loves that are living and dead;
Of some one whose first love affair
Incautiously went to his head.
There are ballads of summer, galore;
Of winter, and springtime, and fall.
Now, add to them one ballad more,—
A ballad of—nothing at all.

There are ballads of damosels fair,
Of jewels, and hat-pins, and rings.
There are ballads of somebody's hair,
Of dresses, and flowers, and—things.
There are ballads profane and devout,
That are sung of the great and the small;
But this, beyond reasonable doubt,
Is a ballad of—nothing at all.

There are ballads of slippers and gloves;
  There are ballads of daggers and swords;
There are ballads of gallant knights' loves,
  And ballads of meaningless words.
There are scores of them, better or worse;
  But think of the consummate gall
Of one who would warble in verse
  A ballad of—nothing at all!

L'ENVOI.

There are ballads of women and wine,
  But they're really beginning to pall.
So this, O beloved of mine,
  Is a ballad of—nothing at all!

A PLEA.

GIVE me one friend, just one, who meets
The needs of all my varying moods;
Be we in noisy city streets,
Or in dear Nature's solitudes.

One who can let the World go by,
And suffer not a minute's pang;
Who'd dare to shock propriety
With me, and never care a hang.

Who, in my rarely righteous streaks,
Should love me,—love me not the less
When I am given to outbreaks
Of pure, besotted selfishness.

One who, when I am sick and glum,
  Can lay conventions on the shelf,
And just for my dear sake become
  A blooming heathen, like myself.

One who can share my grief or mirth,
  And know my days to praise or curse;
And rate me just for what I'm worth,
  And find me still,—Oh, not so worse!

Give me one friend, for peace or war,
  And I shall hold myself well-blest,
And richly compensated for
  The cussedness of all the rest.

JIMMIE CASEY.

JIMMY CASEY.

NOW, I love Jimmy Casey and I'm sure that
he loves me;
Though I am well past twenty-two, and Jimmy's
only three.
Besides, I sometimes think his love is based on
earthly joys.
('Tis little cakes and pies that win the hearts of
little boys.)
But he protests, one eye on them, the other eye
on me,
He loves me, though I'm twenty-two and he is
only three.

He loves me; yet, though I forbid, he'll play
with kerosene;
He'll pound nails in the porch-step, and he'll
punch holes in the screen.
He'll cheerfully avail himself of cake dough, on
the sly,
And take a dirty stove-rag and scrub everything
near by;
And, beaming on me, pipe up, "Ain't I ist
a-helpin' you?"
Ah, what are other loves to ours, at three and
twenty-two?

He's not at all imposing in appearance, I confess;
He has a shocking disregard for anything like dress.
He likes to wear blue overalls, and not be kept too clean,
And happens in at dinner-time, bareheaded and serene.
He doesn't always do just as I'd like to have him do;
But, then, you see, he's only three and I am twenty-two.

Dear little Jimmy Casey's love, though tinged with policy,
Is just about the nicest thing in all this world to me.
Gold couldn't buy an ounce of it; I'd rather see it shine
For me down in the gray eyes of this cavalier of mine.
And so, as long as I love him, as long as he loves me,
We'll laugh to think I'm twenty-two and he is only three.

FRIENDS.

WHEN friends prove false, or you trust them
less,
Or your principles don't agree,
You can overlook such sinfulness
As long as you still have *me*.

When I'm dead tired of this vale of tears
And grouchy and cross and blue,
I've a balm that heals and a hope that cheers
As long as I still have *you*.

And so, till we come to the parting of ways,
We'll have to brace up one another;
And you'll give thanks, and I'll render praise
That each of us still has t' other.

LATE LOVE.

20

"SPEAK, Love," I said,
"Some word of welcome, some
Dear old familiar phrase, for I am come
Unto my own at last, across the years."—
But Love was dumb.

"See, Love," I cried,
"The years I thought unkind
Have left me stronger, left my soul refined
And purified. These are not bitter tears."—
But Love was blind.

"O Love," I wept,
"For us the summer's sped,
For us no song is sweet, no rose is red;
Yet we shall live triumphant o'er our
fears."—
But Love was dead.

THE CORNERS OF HER MOUTH TURN UP LIKE THIS ⌣.

HER MOUTH.

SHE has eyes that can be steely,—
They would make you shiver, really,
She's an eminently practical young miss.
And my faint heart goes a-flutter
At the wisdom she can utter;
But the corners of her mouth turn up like this ⌣

She's unearthly fond of learning,
But her journalistic yearning
Those of masculine persuasion take amiss.
They're a precious lot of stupids
Not to see that bow of Cupid's,
Where the corners of her mouth turn up like this ⌣

She's distractingly specific
On all matters scientific;
She's a living, breathing, moving sacrifice
On the altar of her calling;
And her firmness is appalling,
But the corners of her mouth turn up like this ⌣

She's cold-blooded—and we know it—
Independent—and she'll show it—
And her style is far from being hit or miss.
She's the essence of precision,
She has plenty of decision,
But the corners of her mouth turn up like this ⌣

She's the dearest little woman,
Could I just be sure she's human,
(Heaven grant she doesn't take the doubt amiss!)
I've a mind to tell her, nearly,
That I love her, dearly, dearly,
When the corners of her mouth turn up like this ⌣

VALENTINES.

MY DEAR, I've no inspired songs to sing you;
(Inspired things, really, are not in my line.)
Yet some gray-uniformed postman will bring you
My Valentine.

A simple thing; no witty, polished phrases;
The work of it is altogether mine.
(It kept me humping like the very blazes,
This Valentine.)

On All Hearts' Day I send this little token
Of love, not genius—genius is divine,—
And this is modest verse, crude, too, and broken,—
Your Valentine.

THE Queen of Hearts she made some tarts
On a February day;
The Knave of Hearts he spied those tarts
And took them quite away.

Of course, you know I love you; so
You are my Queen of Hearts.
I've wondered, too, if it was you
Who made those toothsome tarts?

Now, I am not a knave, God wot!
Yet, had I knavish arts,
'Twould be the Queen I'd steal, I ween,
And leave behind the tarts.

UPON this day
When others may
To frills and lace incline,
Some verses that
Are rather flat
Shall be your Valentine.

To sing your praise
In borrowed phrase
Is not what I shall do.
In my own way
I'd rather say
Just what I think of you.

My sentiment
Is short, but sent
With fervor, lady mine.
It fills the bill:
I love you. Will
You be my Valentine?

DEAR, I love you. Did you know?
Did I ever tell you so,
In the summers, long ago,
Out in Kansas?
Love you in the same old way,
Love you every blessèd day;
That's the most that I can say
In these stanzas.

All your graces I'd extol,
For I love you, heart and soul,
Love you, Rinkie, more'n a whole
Mint o' money!
Will you send me just one sign
That you'll have this heart of mine?
And you'll be my Valentine,
Won't you, honey?

IF YOU love me as I love you,
Dear Mr. Tommy Traddles,
We'll sail through life in one canoe,
And *you* may use the paddles.

Because that's only fair, you know;
You may remember when, sir,
You were a younker, long ago,—
I did the paddling then, sir.

Come weal or woe, come rain or shine,
Dear Mr. Tommy Traddles,
Be good to your old Valentine,—
Her heart 's between the paddles.

WHEN BINKIE IS THE "TAGGER" IN THE SHOW.

WHEN BINKIE IS THE "TAGGER" IN THE SHOW.

HE CAN NOT chase the chickens, and he can not tease the cat;
And this, if nothing else, would make him sore.
He can not drag back in the yard the scraps of rubbish that
Were cast out in the alley days before.
He can not pull the clothes from off the line on washing-day;
He can not do a single thing,—O no!
It's Binkie's day for duty, and he much regrets to say
That he has to be the "tagger" in the show.

He'll not pretend he likes it to be penned up in a cage,
He doesn't fancy eating peanut shells;
He rides in "the percession," in a gilded equipage,
And is met at every turn with cheers and yells.
His picture's painted on the side, extremely fierce and grim,—
He's supposed to be so very wild, you know,—
And the neighbors' kids he likes to chase don't do a thing to him,
When Binkie is the "tagger" in the show.

He doesn't seem to know that there are others
in the ring;
He thinks that he's the whole menagerie;
He wags his tail and barks, and tugs quite madly
at his string,
When he thinks some one has come to set him
free.
It makes him wild when some stray cow roves
into our back-yard,
He'll show that beast a thing or two! But,
no,—
He remembers, and he grits his teeth. Captivity
is hard!
But he has to be the "tagger" in the show.

The Joneses' chickens stray within our new
tomato patch;
He tries in vain to break his bonds once more;
The Wiggses' cat, which he has often tried so
hard to catch,
Now boldly marches in our kitchen door.
The milkman misses "that dern dog," that makes
so great a fuss;
The meat-man looks relieved, his gait is slow.
It's the only time a little peace is granted unto us,
When Binkie is the "tagger" in the show.

The Call of Kansas.

Surfeited here with beauty, and the sensuous-sweet perfume,
Borne in from a thousand gardens and orchards of orange-bloom;
Awed by the silent mountains, stunned by the breaker's roar—
The restless ocean pounding and tugging away at the shore—
I lie in the warm sand beach and hear, above the cry of the sea,
The voice of the prairie calling,
Calling me.

Sweeter to me than the salt sea spray the fragrance of summer rains;
Nearer my heart than these mighty hills are the windswept Kansas plains.
Dearer the sight of a shy, wild rose by the roadside's dusty way
Than all the splendor of poppy-fields, ablaze in the sun of May.
Gay as the bold poinsettia is, and the burden of pepper-trees,
The sunflower, tawny and gold and brown, is richer, to me, than these.
And rising over above the song of the hoarse, insistent sea,
The voice of the prairie calling,
Calling me.

Kansas, beloved Mother, today in an alien land,
Yours is the name I have idly traced with a bit of wood in the sand.
The name that, flung from a scornful lip, will make the hot blood start;
The name that is graven, hard and deep, on the score of my loyal heart.
Oh! higher, clearer, and stronger yet than the boom of the savage sea,
The voice of the prairie calling,
Calling me.

—Esther M. Clark.